

LEADING ARTICLES

IN THE

Journal of the British Medical Association.

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BY ARTHUR LEARED, M.D.  
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[The Author was prevented by circumstances from bringing this subject before the present Meeting at the proper time. He prints this now because he believes it to be opportune to do so, and he has no motive but to elicit discussion on an important matter.]

The remarks which I am about to make are not offered hastily, nor without consideration. When it is stated that they refer to the conduct of the Journal of the Association, I wish to add that they have no personal bearing. No one is more ready to admit than I am the great ability with which our late editor performed the arduous task entrusted to him. In some respects the Journal became in his hands a model of what such a publication should be. I also bear willing testimony to the able manner in which, under the present management, his labours have been continued.

Nevertheless, I feel convinced that the system under which our Journal is conducted is in some respects erroneous. My views, if carried out, would make the editorial work easier, and less invidious because less responsible.

Not a century ago the "leading article" was a thing unknown. Newspapers confined themselves to that which accorded with their original intention—the dissemination of news. The fourth estate was as yet no power. No one dreamt of the gigantic proportions which it presents to-day. But faithfully and well as this fourth estate has in many respects performed the high functions which it has assumed to itself, it may be fairly questioned whether the advantages it confers compensate for the great drawbacks entailed by the adoption of a system which seriously interferes with free thought?

Every public event, whether of a domestic nature, or involving relations with foreign countries, before the era of "leaders," necessarily exercised the faculties of readers, because they left no alternative but to think for themselves. But a lazier and less healthy method now prevails; men pay other men to think for them. The organ through which these paid men give their utterances becomes a tremendous force, insensibly swaying the minds of multitudes. The newspaper does not merely reflect—but it leads public opinion. Hence it is that in the ordinary meetings of men, we do not hear them speaking their own thoughts, or stating their own conclusions, but speaking and explaining the thoughts and conclusions put into their mouths by their daily paper. We can indeed generally say of one that he is talking from the "Times," of another from the "Standard," or of a third from the "Daily News," and so on, with perfect confidence, although it may be that the speaker himself, from the habitual practice of adopting ready-made ideas, is quite unconscious of the fact.

Now whatever difference of opinion may be entertained about this kind of action of one mind upon many, in ordinary political matters, I think it will be conceded that there are other circumstance in which it must be pernicious.

I contend that no one man or set of men should be constituted as the anonymous mouth-piece of this great Association. The conviction has been forced upon me that we are pursuing a wrong course.

The British Medical Association now numbers more than 4000 Members, and the *British Medical Journal* is its accredited organ. In a certain sense the editorial statements made in the journal are sanctioned by this great body of educated men. To guide these statements fairly, to be always just, would require an unerring instinct, scarcely human. It is one thing to write ably and with spirit, and another to be always impartial. It is notorious that our profession is pervaded by a spirit of clique, and how rare is it that a man is not open to some whisper of friendship, of dislike, or of self-interest. I speak openly, because the subject demands it. In the very ability with which our Journal is anonymously edited, lies the danger. A stupid article, no matter what its purport, is comparatively harmless; but no article, however able, should be admitted, to the possible perversion of what is just, or one which is contrary to the views of a majority of this Association. I say this, because a majority should not in this matter rule the minority,—unless indeed, it can be maintained that the Association exists for the Journal, and not the Journal for the Association.

In general politics questions are treated by the organs of respective parties from their different standing points, so that what is said on the one side may thus be compared with what is said on the other. The distortions of each may in this way be in a some measure rectified by him who will take the trouble. The smaller field of Medical Politics affords the same opportunity, quite independently of the *British Medical Journal*; no want is therefore supplied by its interference in this direction.

This leads to another grave consideration. Is it proper or consistent with the dignity of this great Association, represented as it is by the Journal, to descend, as it has descended, in that representative, into the arena of small animosities, or of mere personal feeling? What in the political world takes the name of party, in the more restricted medical world degenerates into clique. We have already seen too much of the result of this, and it is only possible, I submit, because the anonymous leading article is allowed to exist.

Once more let me remind you that virtually the Journal speaks in the name of the Association. That, at all events, is the light in which its utterances are regarded by a large number of readers, a wide difference therefore exists, in this respect, between our organ, and a purely political organ. The party which a political Journal represents is an unknown quantity, and its proprietary is anonymous. Antagonism is the life and soul of such a Journal. The plant grows in congenial soil, and is cultivated for the profit it yields. With us, on the contrary, this antagonism is a noxious weed, and should have no place. There is another error into which the Journal ought not to fall, but which it has not escaped, it ought never to become a partizan. It is indisputable that any man who seeks for an office, or is charged with a fault, will have his cause unduly strengthened, or else unduly damaged, by the editorial comments of the *British Medical Journal*. If the exact line between what is just and what is unjust could be always observed, this would be desirable. But it is impossible to observe this, for in such matters there is seldom unanimity of opinion, and yet an anonymous writer will exercise a more powerful influence than the same writer could effect in an ordinary Medical Journal.

All readers may understand the connexion between the Association and their Journal, and yet a large proportion of them will not duly estimate the bearings of this in a given case, but will assume that because it is sanctioned by the one it is sanctioned by the other. An old maxim has it, "Give me the writing of the people's songs, and you may write their laws." So it may with truth be

said of this Association, "Give me the writing of your leading articles, and I will direct your counsels." It is, indeed, not too much to say that a clever editor may in this way come virtually to rule over the entire Association.

Great advantages have unquestionably resulted from the organization of this influential Association. In a social point of view this is especially the case. The local meetings throughout the country, as well as the annual gathering which we are now celebrating, are of immense use in bringing us together under agreeable circumstances. We thus come to know more of each other than would otherwise be possible, and we come also to be more and more convinced—that in unity lies our strength.

Nevertheless; how often is not something like the following spoken amongst us? What after all has the Association done to advance professional knowledge, which is commensurate with its organization and its large means?

The truth is that the field of usefulness which lies open to it in certain directions has scarcely been entered upon. The admirable report of the Edinburgh Committee on the secretion of bile shows how much may be effected by the judicious encouragement of such labours. Records of this kind give a lasting value to the Journal far transcending that which the most able anonymous writing could give. It may be then, that the Journal at present not only occupies too prominent a place in our minds, but absorbs too much of our funds.

To return to leading articles—it is a question whether the space they take up would not be better filled by fuller reports, of the branch meetings of the Association, and with professional papers; for the admission of which there is a constant pressure. But if leaders must exist, let them be signed by their respective authors. By this means their injurious results will be, in a great measure, prevented. The system of signing such articles has long prevailed in France. In many periodicals in this country, the articles are also signed, and the practice is gaining ground. That the reasons for adopting it in the case of our Journal are more cogent than ordinary I have already endeavoured to enforce.

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